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ABSTRACT

It has been two years since the Evaluation Research Society (ERS) published its Standards for Program Evaluation. The standards have influenced professional activities, such as panel discussions, and have been useful in training evaluators. However, the question arises as to whether the standards have been consulted by practicing evaluators or persons hiring evaluators. The ERS standards were sponsored by wealthy organizations with large staffs, and reflect that bias. Careful adherence to the standards requires more resources than are often available. Moreover, the standards suggest that evaluators should be extraordinarily capable, and possess many skills: (1) scientist/researcher/clinician; (2) administrator/manager; (3) contractor/business partner; (4) humanist; and (5) communicator/action agent. The standards need to be made more widely applicable for institutions with a small budget as well as for wealthy organizations. Principles are needed which address the following issues: choices faced by evaluators; ethical considerations betwen the evaluator and the client; and context, costs, and control. Considerations of these principles could result in a set of standards which is even better than a merger of the ERS standards and the Joint Committee standards. The standards stimulate reexamination of the practice of evaluation. (GDC)

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On the ERS Standards[1]

Scarvia B. Anderson

The ERS Standards for Program Evaluation were published in September 1982, along with a varied set of critiques and of comparisons to other evaluation standards. Most people agreed that they were fairly well written (in spite of some unfortunate typographical errors), did not minimize the complexity of the enterprise but still managed to be parsimonious, and were relatively benign in substance but set a dangerous precedent for similar endeavors by appearing without benefit of substantial grants or subsidies.

Now, after two years, we on this panel are asked to look at them with a fresh eye. What effects, if any, have these standards had on our profession? And, knowing what we know now, how would we rethink, revise, or combine them?

There are at least three kinds of answers to the first question. There is no doubt that the standards have influenced professional activity. This panel is an example, and there have been a number of other occasions for papers and presentations commenting on the ERS Standards.

A couple of those papers have mentioned that the Standards were also useful in training evaluators. For example, Braskamp has used them in his classes, though he had to supplement them carefully in order to counteract student boredom and to introduce students to the important issue of trade

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1. Evaluation Research Society, San Francisco, October 11, 1984.

offs.

The area in which the standards should, presumably, have their main effect is evaluation practice. I have to count on my colleagues here to document any such effects that they know of. For example, has any government agency consulted the Standards in drafting an RFP? (For that matter, has any major government RFP for evaluation been drafted in the last three years?) Have any real-life evaluators checked their evaluation plans by the Standards? Have any clients referred to the Standards when they reviewed proposals, contracts, or reports?

Meanwhile, in my own practice, it has slowly dawned on me that the ERS Standards are rich folks' standards--Republican standards, if you will. Thinking back to the time when the Standards were developed and remembering who the people were who contributed substantially to them, it is not difficult to see how they acquired this gloss. For example, when I worked on the Standards, I was employed by a rich company that bid for million-dollar contracts as a matter of course. It had a staff of lawyers and contract officers to concern themselves with negotiations, the likes of Fred Lord and Paul Holland to consult on design and measurement, field offices with skilled professionals to take care of data collection, a whole department under Al Beaton to carry out the most sophisticated analyses, a security office to protect data files, and an editorial staff to weed out infelicities of expression and make sure that reports reached all the right people.

Today, the evaluations I'm involved with either are in a university setting (and in the poorest funded departments in that setting) or are small parts of small consulting contracts. Negotiation alone could eat up the

whole budget. The nurses or insurance personnel or whoever the "subjects" are will sit still for only one eight-item pretest, and the program director forgets to give that to most of them before they've been exposed to the program. The opportunity to try out an exciting new freshman program disappears when the dean ordains that there will be no departures from the standard lecture format. The division head buries your report because he didn't like one recommendation in it and says, "I'll see that you never get another job from this company."

The present ERS Standards are not only rich folks' standards, they are standards for Captain Marvels and super moms--the multitalented, mutifaceted, extraordinarily capable. I went through all 55 of the Standards again to see what underlying classifications might be lurking there--classifications other than "Negotiation," "Data Collection," and so on. These five emerged very clearly:

Evaluator as Scientist/Researcher/Clinician

Evaluator as Administrator/Manager

Evaluator as Contractor/Business Partner

Evaluator as Humanist

Evaluator as Communicator/Action Agent

The last time I discussed these Standards publicly was in the spring of 1983, part of the professional activity the Standards have stimulated. I speculated whether standards of this kind might be more useful if they included general principles as well as specific cautions. That approach makes even more sense to me as I see the need to make the standards more widely applicable--to poor folks as well as rich folks, to Democrats as well

as Republicans. What sorts of principles? Principles bearing on the kinds of judgments, trade offs, values, and ethical considerations that evaluators can expect to face. For example, a principle might pertain to the evaluator's seeking the most pertinent information obtainable within the constraints of the situation, and then with whose definition of 'most pertinent' was appropriate in various cases; or a principle might deal with times when an evaluator must say, "There's nothing I can do to help you," if a client insists on a particular definition of the task, and encourage the evaluator to suggest other ways of looking at the problem that might be useful. We assume somehow that professionals in any field have such principles well embodied, that graduate schools did their jobs of acculturating them. But is that a safe assumption nowadays--and in a profession that crosses traditional graduate school disciplines? Can we invent a set of evaluation standards that provide some specific prompts to professional behavior and go beyond mere application of knowledge?

It would be a tough job to develop such a set of standards without Moses, Hammurabi, or Lewis Carroll on the Standards Committee, and the activity would surely generate more controversy than "hard" versus "soft" evaluation. But it would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor if the result provided some guidance or consolation to evaluators trying to be decent and honest and hold up their heads in peculiar contexts, where they have neither sufficient money nor a sense of control.

Context, costs, and control are at least three of the issues that we need to address in rethinking, revising, or combining our standards. With respect to control, for example, the individual therapist has a choice of

treatments to use with a patient. The therapist also has the choice of releasing or referring a patient. Thus, it is not unreasonable to hold the therapist accountable for abusing the patient, and the APA Ethical Code covers such behaviors. But how about the program evaluator whose client in some way abuses patients? What are the program evaluator's responsibilities?

. . . . . .

In this rambling discourse, I have suggested that the present ERS Standards may be rich folks' standards and asked whether they could be modified to provide some guidance for poor folks struggling to do good, if not grand, evaluation work.

I have wondered whether the best approach might be to build the standards around general principles of evaluation conduct, principles related to judgment and resolution of the kinds of dilemmas evaluators face, although I recognize that development of such guidelines would be a formidable task.

And I have submitted that, whatever form any new standards take, they should take account of the varying contexts, costs, and controls in the activities we lump together under the rubric "evaluation."

I have not commented directly on the proposed combination of the ERS and Joint Committee Standards, though I am not against such a combination in principle. But I think we have an opportunity now to give a little more thought to what the most useful kinds of evaluation guidelines might be, and it would be silly to spend our time pasting, patching, and politicking if we can produce something even better than either set of existing standards.

I feel I have a special right to be critical of the ERS Standards in the way I have been, because I am both an original author and a Republican. Furthermore, I happen to think the Standards are really quite good and can be useful for some time to come. However, I think their greatest strength is in their existence--and in the stimulus they provide for periodic reexamination of the evolving art, science, and practice of evaluation.